

# THE OLD MILL MYSTERY.

By ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT, B. A.

Author of "Miser Hoadley's Secret," "Madeline Power," "By Whose Hand," "Is," &c., &c.

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## PROLOGUE.

"But don't you mean the woman must be discharged, doctor?"

"Yes; that's exactly what I do mean. There's no alternative."

"Well, but she's just as mad as when she first came into the asylum," exclaimed the first speaker, Mrs. Hoyle, the matron of the female side of Wadsworth lunatic asylum.

"Yes; I know that as well as you do," returned Dr. Batley; "but here's the order from the commissioners for her release, and we've neither the right to question it nor the power to detain the woman."

looked eagerly at the girl out of his keen, clear blue eyes, over which hung dark, curly brows.

"No, I am not angry, but—"

"But what?" he asked, as she hesitated.

She was silent a moment, and then, with a slight blush, again tinged her cheeks, she looked kindly at him and said:

"The 'but' was, that I think you had better not call me by my Christian name."

The man laughed a good-natured, hearty, self-satisfied laugh.

"Nonsense, Mary, nonsense. Who-over-holds of anyone objecting to such a thing hereabouts? I think of you as Mary—aye, and as my Mary, too, my lass, in spite of all you said last time; and what's more, I shall never think anything else," he added, very earnestly, as he went closer to her.

"You forget, Mr. Gorringer, that you are the manager of the mill, and I am only one of the work people."

"Nonsense, stuff and rubbish, Mary. I was a mill hand, too, wasn't I? and not so long ago, either. If I've made a bit of brass, where's the good of it, if I can't do what I like, aye, and have whom I like to share it. You'd better change your mind, lass, and say you'll marry me."

"I have told you—," she began, when he interrupted her impudently.

"Yes; yes; I know you've told me, and more than once for the matter of that," and he laughed again good-naturedly. "And what's more, you'll have to go on telling me scores of times yet, before I shall believe you. You'll have to give me in the long run."

"I cannot be, Mr. Gorringer."

"Reuben," he interposed; "you may as well call me by that name first as last."

"No," said the girl, decidedly. "To me you are Mr. Gorringer, my employer, and I cannot call you anything else."

"Stuff and rubbish. See now what it means. Seven years ago, I was a mill-hand. Five years ago, I had scraped up enough to start the old Wadsworth mill. Three years ago, I took the management of this old Wadsworth mill; and today I'm ready for another move on. I can put my hand on a good bit of brass to-day, and I'm going to be a rich man, Mary; and if you'll marry me, you shall be a rich woman."

The girl shook her head at this speech, which jarred on her.

"It's not money I care about," she said.

"What is it, then? Is it love?" he cried, in a voice suddenly full of passion. "Don't you think that I love you? What can I do to persuade you? There are many things I hold dear in this world; money, money, reputation, power—but I'd give them all up, with-out a murmur, if to win you, Mary. I would swear I would," he said, vehemently. "Won't you trust me and be my wife, lass?"

His voice sank almost to a whisper and his eyes and face were alight with his love for the girl.

"I have told you it cannot be. I am very sorry," she answered.

He stayed a full half minute without speaking, merely letting his hand rest on her arm, while his eyes were fixed on her face.

"Do you doubt me, Mary?" he asked.

"No, no, Mr. Gorringer," she answered, impulsively; "but—but it is hard for me to have to say this; I do not love—"

He interrupted her with a light laugh, and then setting both her hands in his, he held her close to him and looked earnestly into her eyes.

"I did not ask you for your love yet, child; I only wait for that. I have plenty for both of us. Give me yourself; that is all I ask now. You trust me, and love shall soon come. I will take you, love or no love, and be only so thankful to have you, my dear."

"No, no," cried the girl, vehemently, struggling to free her hands. "Let me go, please, Mr. Gorringer. You have no right to hold me like this."

He let her go instantly.

"I forgot myself. I do forget myself, and everything else, when I am with you, Mary. But you must be my wife. I cannot live without you." Then he started, and paled a little, as a thought flashed across his mind. "It's not—but, no, it can't be, or I should have seen it. It's not that you care for anyone else, is it?"

He asked this in a firm, low voice.

"The right have you to question me?" said the girl, blushing, partly with indignation, partly with confusion.

"The man looked at her keenly, knitting his heavy brows till they frowned ominously.

"Do you think I'm a man to be fooled lightly?" he asked, in a quick, stern tone. "Then he changed again, and spoke quietly, without giving the girl time to reply. "There's no need for pretense between us two. You've seen—yes, you must have seen—the hold you have over me. I've made no secret that I love you. You can do with me what you will, for I'm a fool in your hands. But take care, my girl; such power as yours over me don't go without responsibility. It's a power that can move me for good or spoil me for life. With such a man there's no middle course, and you can do what you will; and, by—if you fool me now for another man there won't be room for us both on this earth. That I swear, and he clenched his fist and brought it down heavily on the gate in front of them."

"I have listened to you too long," said the girl. "When you talk to me about fooling you, I see how stupid I have been."

"I'm sorry, I am; I swear I am; I didn't mean what I said. Ah, Mary, don't turn away like that. I'll go away if you wish it. But I can't trust myself when I think of losing you. Tell me I've no reason to think that."

"Mr. Gorringer!"

"Did I startle you out of a pleasant reverie?" asked the man. "But it is so great a pleasure to find you alone for me to resist the temptation of speaking to you. You are not angry?"

The speaker was a thick-set man of some thirty years of age, with large, well-shaped, ruddy features that shone with a certain glow of life.

"Miss Ashworth—"

A dark, pretty girl, dressed in black, who stood leaning upon a gate just inside the mill village of Wadsworth Bridge, started and turned round, and a slight flush showed for a moment on her features, as she heard her name thus spoken.

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ry you, and I only give you a chance to put such a question to me."

"I have the right that love gives me," he burst out vehemently again. "Now, I believe there is somebody. But you shall never marry anyone, if you don't marry me; that I swear on my soul," he exclaimed, passionately. "And you know whether I'm a man to keep my word."

Then, as the girl was turning away, he went quickly to her and seized her arm rather roughly.

"Will you swear to me that you care for no one more than for me?" he asked, angrily.

"Let me go, Mr. Gorringer; how dare you hold me like that?" she cried, angrily and excitedly, her face flushing with feeling.

He held her hold of her and walked on determinedly by her side.

"I mean to have an answer," he said, doggedly.

"You shall have no answer from me," she replied.

"Then I'll watch you till I find out," he said, and then they walked on in silence.

Suddenly as they turned a sharp curve in the road, the man saw his companion start, and a troubled look came over her face; and then he noticed the color rise in her cheeks and deeper, as a tall, upstanding, handsome young fellow approached.

"Why, Mary, what's the matter?" cried the newcomer, stopping in front of them. "Good evening, Mr. Gorringer," he added, turning for a moment to the latter.

"Hullo, Tom? Why, nothing, of course," answered the girl.

"Good evening, Reuben," said Reuben Gorringer; "there's nothing more the matter than that Miss Ashworth—"

Mary, that is—and I have been for a walk together, and have had an interesting little talk. That's all."

And while he was speaking, and after he had finished, he looked curiously from one to the other.

"Indeed," said Tom Roylance, coolly. "Then, as Mary and I have an appointment to go to for a walk with her, and to have an interesting little talk; and as I had fixed in the other direction for the walk, we won't trouble you to turn back," and without saying anything more he took the girl's hand, tucked it into his arm, and walked away with her.

"But why does it affect you so much, Tom?" asked the girl. "You surely aren't deceived about Gorringer being idle and a loafer?"

"No, not likely. But, then, don't you see, a fellow must stick by the union. Even if he can't stand it, as Gorringer has got the car of all the officers of the society, except me, and he can make them believe that Gorringer has sacked him, not because he's an idle chap, but because the boss knows he is powerful in the society, and is aiming a blow at the union through Gorringer. Do you see that? Well, if he succeeds in that—and I'm pretty well sure he will—he may easily get on to make a union job, and then there'll be mischief. Now you see why I'm a bit worried."

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"Yes. It's that lazy fellow, Gibson Prawl, again. I wish the fellow were out of Wadsworth Bridge altogether. You know the way he can talk to the folk, and how he can turn them this way and that. Well, he's got the sack to-day, and he won't be able to bring out the men unless Gorringer takes him on again. And you know Gorringer."

"He's the last man to give way in such a thing."

"That's as plain as a pike staff, but I'm thinking there may be trouble," and Tom's brow was puckered with a good many frowns of perplexity.

"What's Gorringer discharged for?" asked Mary Ashworth.

"Why, because he's a lazy, loafing, down-trodden, and Gorringer, who does know when a man works and when he loaf, swears he won't have him about the place doing naught but getting the rest of the hands all in a tangle. So he paid him off to-day and bundled him out of the place neck and crop."

"So he is a lazy fellow, everybody knows that," said Mary, energetically, "and most will be glad he's gone."

"He's not gone yet, and that's the mess."

"But what is it to you or to anyone else, Tom, whether Mr. Gorringer keeps him on or sends him away?"

"Oh, if you belonged to the union, you'd know how to answer that question. Even if you can't stand it, as Gibson has got the car of all the officers of the society, except me, and he can make them believe that Gorringer has sacked him, not because he's an idle chap, but because the boss knows he is powerful in the society, and is aiming a blow at the union through Gorringer. Do you see that? Well, if he succeeds in that—and I'm pretty well sure he will—he may easily get on to make a union job, and then there'll be mischief. Now you see why I'm a bit worried."

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"No, not likely. But, then, don't you see, a fellow must stick by the union. Even if he can't stand it, as Gorringer has got the car of all the officers of the society, except me, and he can make them believe that Gorringer has sacked him, not because he's an idle chap, but because the boss knows he is powerful in the society, and is aiming a blow at the union through Gorringer. Do you see that? Well, if he succeeds in that—and I'm pretty well sure he will—he may easily get on to make a union job, and then there'll be mischief. Now you see why I'm a bit worried."

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